

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

ASSESSING THE KURDISH QUESTION: WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF KURDISTAN?

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Kurds with an estimated population of 25 to 28 million people are arguably the largest nation in the world without its own independent state. The Kurdish population spreads into four countries, in an area referred to as Kurdistan. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, the first free elections in Iraq were held in January 2005, the Iraqi constitution was passed in a referendum in October 2005, and successful elections were held in December 2005. The Kurds are now wielding more political influence over the future of Iraq and the future of Iraqi Kurdistan. These events have given rise to Kurdish expectations of independence; or at a minimum, a federalist Iraq. United States foreign policy can no longer ignore the Kurdish question as it applies to the Middle East and to U. S. credibility on the world stage. This paper will analyze U. S. policy towards the Kurds in the future Iraq. Can Iraq unite with a power sharing agreement between Arab Shiites, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds? If Iraq cannot become united, can a peaceful separation be achieved that will maintain stability in the region? How should U.S. foreign policy proceed?

ASSESSING THE KURDISH QUESTION: WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF KURDISTAN?

The Kurds with an estimated population of 25 to 28 million people, are arguably the largest nation in the world without its own independent state.¹ The Kurdish population spreads into four countries, in an area referred to as Kurdistan. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, the first free elections in Iraq were held in January 2005, the Iraqi constitution was passed in a referendum in October 2005, and successful elections were held in December 2005. The Kurds are now wielding more political influence over the future of Iraq and the future of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq, have prospered in a semi-autonomous region, since 1991, under the creation of the United Nation sponsored "safe haven" and enforced by the U.S. and U.K. no-fly zone.² The Iraqi Kurds have been able to institutionalize self-rule in Northern Iraq through the Kurdistan regional government.³ These events have given rise to Kurdish expectations of independence; or at a minimum, a federalist Iraq. United States foreign policy can no longer ignore the Kurdish question as it applies to the Middle East and to U. S. creditability on the world stage.

This paper will analyze U. S. policy towards the Kurds in the future Iraq. Can Iraq unite with a power sharing agreement among Arab Shiites, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds? If Iraq cannot unite, can a peaceful separation be achieved that will maintain stability in the region? How should U.S. foreign policy proceed? The recent referendum on the Iraqi constitution established regional control for the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan. The passing of the Iraqi constitution also established that oil and gas belong to all of the people of Iraq and revenues would be equally shared by regions. A continuing territorial dispute between Iraqi Kurdistan and Arab Iraq over the area in and around the oil rich city of Kirkuk in northern Iraq may be at the crux of a stable Iraq. The status of Kirkuk as either a part of Iraqi Kurdistan or Arab Iraq will be decided by a referendum no later than December 31, 2007.⁴ The outcome of this referendum could have a large impact on the unity of Iraq, reaction of neighboring countries, and an exit strategy for the United States.

Historical Background

To begin to understand the Kurdish question, one must look at the history of the Kurds, their struggle for autonomy and independence, and the region known as Kurdistan. The Kurds are an ancient Middle Eastern tribal community, without its own state, that has struggled to maintain its identity. The modern day region of Kurdistan lies in an area where Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran converge. The Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslim and speak an Indo-European language. They are ethnically distinct from Turks and Arabs.⁵ As an ethnic group, the Kurds

are seen by Iranians as outsiders, a troublesome minority. To the Arabs, the Kurds are non-Arab. To the Turks, the Kurds are a different racial and linguistic group. The Kurds have a history of being alienated by the societies surrounding them and this has manifested into a resistance to assimilation.⁶ This fuels their struggle to gain autonomy in a hostile environment. That in turn made the Kurds ripe for exploitation by all powers interested in the region and dispensable pawns in world politics.⁷

Prior to World War I, Kurdistan was divided between the Ottoman and Qajar empires.⁸ Neither empire questioned the existence of the Kurds, but the Kurdistan region was the site of many clashes between the Ottomans and Persian rulers, with Kurdish princes siding with one side and then the other in order to maintain their autonomy.⁹ By the end of World War I, the Kurdistan region was in complete disarray from the ravages of war leaving only the local Kurdish tribal chieftains in control. In January 1918, Woodrow Wilson's 14 point speech laid out his vision for world peace. The Kurds saw an allusion in it to support Kurdish autonomy. The 12th point stated that the Turkish portions of the Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of an autonomous development.¹⁰ This was the first indication of possible Kurdish autonomy and an independent state. The Treaty of Sevres in 1920 in part stated the Kurds could have autonomy in Kurdish areas and a future independent state, subject to agreement by the League of Nations. This aspect of the treaty was never enacted. The United States did not want to get involved because it still had an isolationist view of the world, Kurdistan was landlocked, and Britain had already annexed a portion of the Kurdistan region.¹¹ With the rise to power of Kemal Ataturk, Turkey gained its independence in 1923 through the Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty did not mention the Turkish Kurds.¹² Coupled with the British creation of Iraq, this dashed the hopes of a Kurdish independent state. Though Woodrow Wilson had a vision for the world communicated through his 14 point speech, the United States did not become a prominent actor in the creation of nation states in the former Ottoman Empire, leaving it to the European powers.

It wasn't until the 1970s that United States foreign policy affected the status of Kurds. This was the beginning of a U.S. policy towards the Kurds that lacked coherence and consistency. The U.S. position on Kurds differed in Turkey and Iraq. In support of U.S. national interests, the Kurds of Turkey were viewed as "bad," and the Kurds of Iraq as "good."¹³

Since Turkey is seen as a valuable geographically strategic NATO ally and a bastion against Islamic fundamentalism, the U.S. supported the Turkish government against the Kurds in Turkey.¹⁴ The Kurds in Turkey were demanding their right to be recognized as Kurds and the

Turkish government refused their demands. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) formed under Abdullah Ocalan in 1978, became an extremist organization and in 1984 officially launched an insurgency in Turkey.¹⁵ The U.S. viewed the PKK and its leader, Ocalan, as a terrorist organization, and a force destabilizing to Turkish territorial integrity. In late 1998, Ocalan was forced to leave his sanctuary in Syria and became a man without a country. The U.S. supported bringing Ocalan to justice and strongly discouraged any country from granting Ocalan asylum. Eventually, Ocalan was captured in early 1999 in Kenya, with U.S. provided technical intelligence to Turkey.¹⁶ At this same time, the U.S. needed to continue to use Turkey air bases in support of operations in Northern Iraq and Iraq was negotiating with Turkey to end its support to the U.S.¹⁷ Thus the capture of Ocalan, with U.S. assistance, most likely assured continued use of Turkey air bases in support of operations in Northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurds.

In contrast to its policy toward Kurds in Turkey, the U.S. policy towards Kurds in Iraq was quite the opposite. In the early 1970's, President Nixon and National Security advisor, Henry Kissinger encouraged Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), to revolt against the government of Iraq. The U.S. covertly set up contacts with Kurdish leaders in Iraq, promising military support and encouraging their plight for autonomy. This support to the Kurds unraveled in March 1975, when then U.S. ally Iran, under the Shah, struck a deal with Saddam Hussein.¹⁸ The U.S. withdrew its support to the Kurds and Iran closed its borders to them. In the following days the Iraqi Army attacked and decimated the Kurd's military power.¹⁹ Henry Kissinger admitted that even with the United States assertion of Kurdish self-determination, the U.S. lacked commitment in the case of the Iraqi Kurds. The U.S. goal in the 1970s was to block Soviet influence and reinforce the Shah of Iran.²⁰ The Iraqi Kurds were being used as insurgents to keep Iraq in check and neither the Shah nor the U.S. ever wanted the Kurds to gain any form of independence. In the end, Iraq accepted Iran's proposal territorial concession in return for cessation of Iranian support for the Kurds in Iraq.²¹ The Kurds have never forgotten how the United States changed its alliances in pursuing its own interests at the expense of the suffering of Kurds.

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991, President Bush encouraged the Iraqis to rise against Saddam Hussein's regime. President Bush argued that only by removing Saddam Hussein from power could stability in the region be achieved.²² Both the Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north answered this call. The Shiite uprising was quickly put down. In the north, the Iraqi Kurds witnessed once again a reversal in the United States position. The United States reduced its rhetorical support, although Colin Powell warned Saddam Hussein to be careful in how he suppresses the insurrections. In fact, the U.S. allowed Iraq to use

helicopter gunships and armored cars against the Kurds in northern Iraq.²³ The Kurds two prominent Kurdish leaders, Massoud Barzani of the KDP and Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), pleaded with President Bush for assistance, by reminding him that he called on the Iraqi people to rise against Saddam Hussein's brutal government.²⁴ By this time, almost two million refugees had fled Iraq to Turkey and Iran. United States statements and policy had caused a security and humanitarian situation in northern Iraq and southern Turkey. United States foreign policy was more concerned with a balance of power in the region, than with the human rights, of minority groups.

Faced with this situation, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 688 that condemned the repression of the Iraqi civilian population, especially in the Kurdish areas, and created a safe haven.²⁵ This led to Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) and a no-fly zone that allowed the Kurds to return to northern Iraq. This created new challenges in United States foreign policy. This resolution allowed the Kurds to now be internationally recognized as a repressed minority group that derived to be protected.

Turkey proved to be indispensable in its support to the OPC by providing bases and logistical support. Turkey was already dealing with a PKK insurgency and an Iraqi Kurdish refugee problem. Always concerned with Kurdish independence aspirations, Turkey was faced with a dilemma in regards to Operation Provide Comfort. If Turkey did not support OPC, they would alienate the U.S. and by supporting OPC, Turkey could influence events in the region. By supporting OPC, Turkey could launch operations against the PKK hiding places in northern Iraq. OPC protected the Iraqi Kurds from the Iraqi government but also enabled Turkey to attack Turkish Kurds in northern Iraq.

Under the protection of the no-fly zone and Operation Provide Comfort (later renamed Operation Northern Watch in 1997), northern Iraq became Iraqi Kurdistan, and a de facto Kurdish state from 1991-2003. In 1992, the two rival Kurdish political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP and PUK, sought to negotiate this new entity with Saddam Hussein. No deal was agreed upon and Saddam created a line of control separating Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq. From this, the Kurds established a Kurdish National Assembly and held parliamentary elections. The KDP narrowly won the elections and it was agreed to establish a power-sharing Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).²⁶ This once again created aspirations of establishing an independent Kurdistan. Internationally, Iraqi Kurdistan was not recognized because it threatened to destabilize the region. Iraq was still a legitimate nation state and Turkey warned it would take action if the Kurds declared independence.²⁷

U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds would become even more complex, when Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK began to fight each other in 1994. The U.S. found itself in a difficult position in protecting the Iraqi Kurds through the no-fly zone, when the Iraqi Kurds were battling each other. Adding fuel to this fire was the continuing PKK problem in Turkey. The PKK attacked the KDP. The KDP supported Turkey in preventing the PKK to conduct cross border attacks into Turkey. Syria, Iran, and the PUK ironically encouraged the PKK. Talabani and the PUK claimed Turkey was arming the KDP. Barzani and the KDP claimed Iran was arming the PUK. In August 1996, Barzani appealed to Saddam to help the KDP in its fight against the PUK. The U.S. found itself contemplating how to enforce a no-fly zone when the people it was suppose to protect had invited Saddam's Army into Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁸ Through a laborious peace process initiated by the U.S., Barzani and Talabani finally agreed to a cease fire and reached the tentative agreement that became known as the Washington Accord. The U.S. made continued promises of support to the Kurds, contingent upon their continuing unity.²⁹

Despite the KDP and PUK fighting, Iraqi Kurdistan became relatively prosperous through the 13 percent Iraqi oil money revenue allowed by the United Nations and the no-fly zone protection. The KDP and PUK political parties have provided Iraqi Kurdistan with functioning police, military, educational opportunities, economic freedoms, stable electricity supplies, judicial reforms based on the rule of law, and a functioning communications network. Iraqi Kurdistan, though far from being a paradise, is the most stable area in post Saddam Iraq.³⁰

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Prior to the U.S.-led invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in March 2003, Turkey denied the U.S. the bases in Turkey to launch a northern front into Iraq. This Turkish decision unintentionally made the Iraqi Kurds a powerful ally for the U.S.³¹ Aided by the Kurdish *peshmerga*, U.S. Forces were able to open a northern front in Iraq and secure the oil fields in and around Kirkuk. The *peshmerga*, "those who face death," are Kurdish legendary freedom fighters, who became an integral part of the success of U.S. Forces in northern Iraq. This and the continuing support of the Kurds during Operation Iraqi Freedom, has ensured the Kurds a prominent role in the future of Iraq.

As Iraq and the U.S. struggle to fight an insurgency and establish a functioning government, the Kurds are determined not to reverse any of the progress they have made in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds have made great inroads into the future of Iraq. Jalal Talabani was elected President of Iraq and Massoud Barzani became the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Kurds voted overwhelmingly for independence in an informal poll held on the

same day as the parliamentary elections on January 30, 2005. At a minimum, the Kurds would accept a federalist Iraq, in which political and economic powers are located in regions and the national government exercises power over foreign and national defense policy.³²

On October 15, 2005, the Iraqis passed the referendum on the Iraq constitution. The Kurds were successful on four core principles that they firmly believe in: federalism, equal rights for women, freedom of individual conscience, and justice for the victims of Baathism.³³ The constitution approved the region of Kurdistan and its regional and federal authorities. In the region of Kurdistan, federal and official organizations use Arabic and Kurdish as the official languages. Oil and gas revenues belong to all Iraqis and the revenue will be shared equitably by the regions. The referendum on the constitution also agreed to decide on the status of Kirkuk by December 31, 2007. Finally, the constitution states that Iraq will be a federal, parliamentary democracy.³⁴

Status of Kirkuk Province and Kirkuk City

The importance of resolving the status of Kirkuk cannot be overstated in the future Iraq. The province of Kirkuk, that contains the city of Kirkuk, remains one of the most contested areas not resolved in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) or in the draft constitution passed in October 2005. It is generally assumed that who controls the region will have power over the vast amounts of oil reserves that exist in and around the city of Kirkuk. The Kurds demand that the Kirkuk region including the city of Kirkuk be part of the autonomous Kurdistan region. The Kurds argue that geographically, historically, demographically, and morally, that the region belongs in Kurdistan.³⁵

Kirkuk, the fourth largest city in Iraq, with about a million people, is ethnically mixed. Its population consists of Arabs, Chaldo-Assyrians, Kurds, and Turcomans. The exact composition of the ethnic groups in the city of Kirkuk and Kirkuk province is not accurately known. The last reliable census conducted in 1957, showed the Turcoman with the majority of the population (37.6 to 39.8%) followed by the Kurds (33.3 to 35.1%), and then the Arabs (22.5 to 23.8%).³⁶ In this same census, the Kurds held an overwhelming majority of the population (48%) of the province. Through Saddam's Arabization policies, the demographics were altered by displacing Kurds, resettling Arabs into the Kirkuk region and changing provincial boundaries. A census conducted in 1977 illustrated this shift, with the Arabs making up 44% and the Kurds 38% of the population of the province.³⁷ These actions continued up through the 1990's under a program termed, "nationality correction," where non-Arabs were expected to change their identification and language to Arabic. If they did not change, their homes and belongings were confiscated

and they were expelled from Kirkuk.³⁸ Due to these Arabization policies the censuses conducted after 1957 are suspect and outdated. The Kurds claim some 220,000 Kurds were displaced out of Kirkuk and the surrounding areas and that over 120,000 Arabs were moved into Kurdish areas.³⁹ All of this has made it extremely difficult to give a reliable estimate of the current demographics of Kirkuk city and the Kirkuk province. Based on voter turnout in the three elections in 2005, it is reasonable to assume that the city of Kirkuk and the province is made up mostly of Arabs and Kurds, with Turcomans a distant third.

Since the fall of Saddam, thousands of Kurds have returned to the Kirkuk Province, filing claims for homes and property lost when they were expelled. The Kurds demand the Arabs that were moved into Kirkuk by Saddam are newcomers and should leave Kirkuk. This in itself would create an injustice as many of the Arabs have now lived in Kirkuk for over 30 years. Both Talabani and Barzani have appeared uncompromising on their position that Kirkuk becomes a part of the Kurdistan region. The Kurds consider Kirkuk to be the Kurdish "Jerusalem."⁴⁰ Turkey has stated that they could move military forces to Kirkuk within 18 hours, if the Kurds attempt to tamper with the population to the disadvantage to the Turcoman living in Kirkuk.⁴¹ Meanwhile the Kurdish political parties are changing the demographics on the ground. Many settlements have developed in and around the city with the assistance of the KDP and PUK political parties. These two bedroom concrete homes are designed and assigned by the engineers working for the political parties. Each repatriated family, known as an Internally Displaced People (IDP), is given \$5,000 to build their homes. The money is paid in installments: \$500 to lay the foundation; \$2,000 when the walls are built; and \$2,500 when the home is completed. The political parties have stated that they have taken over repatriations because the central government has failed to provide for the IDPs to return to Kirkuk.⁴² The issue becomes even more complex when the lands repatriated are claimed by the Arabs.

The constitution passed in October 2005 addresses the resolution of the Kirkuk situation which will be decided no later than December 31, 2007. The new constitution reaffirms the completion of the implementation of Article 58 from the Transitional Administration Law. The status of Kirkuk will be determined in three stages. First it will be brought back to the demographic level it was before Saddam's era. Then a census will be conducted followed by a referendum to decide whether or not to include Kirkuk in the Kurdistan region.⁴³ A possible solution, as proposed by leaders in the Kurdistan Regional Government, is to have a power sharing arrangement among the ethnic groups in the city of Kirkuk, and Kirkuk province is included in the Kurdistan region.⁴⁴ The acceptable solution will have to include an equitable distribution of the region's oil resources. In the meantime, the Kurdish political parties are

aggressively working to alter the demographics prior to the census and influence the future of Kirkuk. The decision on the status of Kirkuk will be pivotal to a future unified Iraq.

United States Policy and the Kurds

U.S. policy is firmly committed to building an inclusive and enduring democratic Iraq. U.S. policy seeks to demonstrate that there is a place for all groups in a new Iraq.⁴⁵ So far the political milestones have been met, but the insurgency continues with increasing American casualties. Public opinion in the U.S. is waning and politicians are calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Polls show Iraqis overwhelmingly see the U.S. as occupiers and want U.S. forces to leave. Countries that have provided forces to defeat the insurgency are withdrawing from Iraq. Domestically and internationally many challenges remain to stabilize Iraq.

Additionally, it is argued that the recently approved Iraqi constitution enforced the sectarian division of Iraq and that differences between Arab Sunni, Arab Shia, and Kurds cannot be overcome. Many Turks and Arabs believe the U.S. supports an independent Kurdistan by reaffirming this ethnic and religious division.⁴⁶ Unlike the other ethnic groups in Iraq, the Kurds are pro-American, and regard themselves as U.S. allies. The U.S. has turned to the Kurds politically and militarily to attain political milestones and stability in different regions of Iraq.

Historically, U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds has been inconsistent and has used the Kurds as a tool for policy. Additionally, powers in the region have previously manipulated the Kurds. History and events happening today should provide U.S. policymakers with some insights and caution in shaping policy in Iraq for the future. The paper will next examine the ramifications and challenges of a federal, pluralistic, and democratic Iraq and the possible secession of Kurdistan from Iraq.

A Decentralized Form of Governance

U.S. policy needs to stay on course to ensure successful decentralized governance in Iraq, while planning for the possible consequences if the Kurds or Shiites declare independence in the future. This is not to say these are the only two options, but they are the most probable. The recently released National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, states as one of the core assumptions that federalism is not a precursor to the breakup of Iraq but that it allows a strong central government to exercise the powers of a sovereign state, while enabling regional bodies to make decisions that protect the interests of local populations.⁴⁷ The challenge lies in the division of powers given to the central government and the regional governments.

The October 2005 draft Constitution establishes a federal central government and regional governments as a form of shared rule and self-rule. The Constitution contains articles

that are vague, contradictory, and arguably threatens the disintegration of the state of Iraq.⁴⁸ As written, the Constitution grants considerable power to the regional governments. Alexander Dawoody points out that some of the key ambiguities in the Constitution are:

- The Constitution contradicts itself in Article 13 and Article 116 with respect to the supreme law of the Federal Constitution and the ability of the regional governments to amend Federal Laws.
- The Constitution is unclear on the establishment of militias. It bans militias from being formed outside of the framework of armed forces, but the Kurdish *peshmerga* is allowed in the Kurdistan region.
- It states that oil and gas revenues will be shared equally by the regions but is unclear on the exploration rights of oil.
- On the subject of private property it states that ownership with the purpose of solidifying demographic changes is forbidden. This implies that one ethnic group could not own property in another ethnic groups region.
- The Constitution approved the region of Kurdistan and its authorities. It also allows for one or more governorates have the right to form into a region. This paves the way for the Kirkuk province to become part of the Kurdistan region.⁴⁹

These particular points in the new Constitution may require amendments for clarification to assist in the creation of a successful federal system.

The new government will have to come to terms with its Armed Forces and the use of militias. Each major ethnic group has established militias, with the Kurdish *peshmerga* as the most prominent. The ethnic militias are used to protect their regions. The Armed Forces are designed to protect the country from external and internal threats and are made up of all ethnic groups, though some Iraqi units are composed of a majority or entirely of one sect or group in their ranks. The militia's alliance is first to their ethnic group and region. Many *peshmerga* units take their orders from the Kurdish political parties.⁵⁰ The role and the use of these forces will have to be clarified in order for a federal Iraq to succeed.

Ensuring a successful federalism to a country lacking in a democratic tradition, with strong ethnic and religious divisions, is an enormous challenge. It ultimately will rely on the people of Iraq to make it work. The Iraqi federation must be voluntary and not imposed by the U.S. or any other outside power. A federal Iraq must be democratic. Constructive relations based on mutual trust and recognition must be built among all ethnic groups. The Kurdish leaders have been active in this process, advocating their own interests while building open and fair Iraqi institutions.

Kurdistan Independence from Iraq

If uniting Iraq fails, then the U.S. must plan for the strong possibility of the Kurds declaring independence. The U.S. cannot deny that a Kurdish pursuit of independence is improbable. History has shown that states have been broken up into new states such as the former Soviet Union and more recently Yugoslavia. Additionally, Singapore split from Malaysia and Bangladesh from Pakistan. Furthermore, the Arabs demand a state for the Palestinians and Turkey wants self-determination for Turkish Cypriots.⁵¹ If a unified Iraq does not materialize, the precedence has been established for the Kurds to claim their independence.

The majority of Kurds aspire for an independent Kurdistan, but Kurdish leaders are careful to distinguish this as a long term goal from current political realities.⁵² An independent Iraqi Kurdistan has external and internal challenges to overcome. The Kurds would have to assure Turkey, Iran, and Syria that they would guarantee the Kurdish populations in their own countries will not rebel. The Kurds would have to make concessions on the status of Kirkuk. A power sharing arrangement by all ethnic groups for Kirkuk may be acceptable to Turkey and other ethnic groups. An independent Iraqi Kurdistan would have to overcome its landlocked situation and develop an economic base. Perhaps the largest challenge for successful independence facing the Kurds, are the internal divisions amongst its own people.

Other challenges to Kurdish independence are Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Each has a minority population of Kurds. If the Iraqi Kurds declare independence in Iraq, the Kurds in these countries may also have aspirations to do the same. The leaders of an Iraqi Kurdistan would have to reassure these countries that they do not aspire to a Greater Kurdistan. The Kurdish population in Turkey has been the most troublesome. Turkish sensitivities in regards to the Kurds are based on three principles: the elimination of the PKK, prevention of Kurdish statehood, and protection of the Turcomans in Iraq.⁵³ For independence to succeed, the Kurds need to address Turkey's concerns on the PKK and the Turcomans. Already some groundwork has begun. Turkey has started to work more closely with the KRG and has promoted Turkish business in Iraqi Kurdistan. Jalal Talabani, the President of Iraq, who has visited Turkey, stated the best way to resolve the PKK issue is through a political solution, not by more force.⁵⁴ Additionally, resolving the PKK issue peacefully through Iraq or the KRG, would increase Turkey's position for acceptance into the European Union (EU). Ironically, if Turkey gains admittance into the EU, its foreign policies would most likely evolve on EU lines, thus reducing Turkey's anxieties over its Kurdish population while increasing its bargaining power in Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan.

Another challenge to an independent Iraqi Kurdistan is developing trade routes and the ability to sustain its economy. Iraqi Kurdistan is landlocked and surrounded by unfriendly neighbors. In order for independence to succeed, the Kurdish leaders would have to develop relations with Turkey and Iran by alleviating their concerns over their own Kurdish populations. Turkey and Iran could influence Iraqi Kurdistan politically and economically by providing linkages other world markets and trade. Turkey might see Iraqi Kurdistan as an insurance policy against an Iraq that may fall under fundamentalist Arabs. Iran on the other hand, may have an interest in keeping good relations with the Kurds, ensuring the Kurds do not become too close to Turkey.⁵⁵

The Kurds may be able to build better relations with Turkey but perhaps the most difficult challenge for the Kurds has to do with internal issues. The two main Kurdish political parties, KDP and PUK, currently have control of Iraqi Kurdistan. The KDP controls the north with a political headquarters in Erbil and the PUK controls the south with a political headquarters in Sulaimaniya.⁵⁶ Each has duplicate systems from TV stations, radio stations, incompatible cell phones, and party controlled universities. They share a hunger for power, patronage, and corruption.⁵⁷ The KDP is older, more tribal, and conservative. The PUK is more secular, younger, and less tribally oriented. They fought against each other from 1994 to 1998, until the U.S. was able to broker a treaty. Barzani the President of the KRG and Talabani the President of Iraq have met with the President of the U.S. lending creditability to each.⁵⁸ Divisions between the parties are deep and they would have to settle their differences in order for independence to succeed.

Conclusion

The U.S. cannot force or expect that a federalist Iraq will work. Policies need to be reassessed periodically to ensure the reality on the ground matches expectations of the policy being pursued. A few examples may illustrate the challenges to U.S. policy. Iraqi Kurdistan is encouraging investment into its economy by external corporations. A Turkish company is already under contract with the KRG to develop the Taq Taq oil field. In another recent development, the KDP contracted with Norway DNO to drill for oil near Zakho without approval or informing the central government in Baghdad.⁵⁹ Additionally, the KRG has established the Hawler International airport in Erbil, which has already flown flights in and out of the Iraqi Kurdistan. Many other international companies are investing in Iraqi Kurdistan. In Sulaimaniyah, there are 48 Turkish and 30 Iranian companies, along with China, Singapore, and several European countries that are also investing in the region.⁶⁰ These developments

show that the Kurdistan region is more stable than the rest of Iraq, but may signal that the Kurds could be hedging their bets and preparing for independence if a united Iraq does not come to fruition.

This paper set out to examine U.S. policy and the Kurds in a future Iraq. The Kurds want freedom, basic human rights, and social equality. The Kurds are willing to live in a federal Iraq, but will not give up the gains they have made in Iraqi Kurdistan. The challenge for U.S. policy is difficult and complex with respect to Iraq and the Kurds. The U.S. policy should stay the course toward federalist governance for Iraq, but U.S. policy must be consistent with actual events on the ground. This policy needs to adhere to Iraqi self-determination and rely more on countries in the region, like the Arab League or Turkey to exercise solutions for the future of Iraq. Policymakers need to push for a compromise on the status of Kirkuk. A special regime to govern Kirkuk is one solution that may be acceptable to all concerned. Kirkuk could become the decisive point for the future of a unified Iraq or a breakup into three separate entities. U.S. policy must plan for the possibility that a federalist form of government may fail and that the Kurds may separate from Iraq. The key for success for the U.S. will be its ability to maintain stability in the region and not abandon the Kurds again. The U.S. should provide incentives for the Kurds to remain as part of Iraq, if a unified Iraq becomes unattainable, the U.S. must assist the Iraqis to manage such a transition peacefully.

Endnotes

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